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Leadership & The Instructional Technology Coach

Consult any contemporary literature about the current state of education in America, and the prose is likely to consist of sentiments in favor of rethinking education for a new generation of learners unlike any our system has seen before. Take the foreword of *What School Leaders Need To Know About Digital Technologies* for example, where the authors include claims such as, “We are rethinking the classroom and the definition of teacher…” and “today’s children are different” (McLeod and Lehmann). At the heart of the conversation about reform are the potential effects technology integration can have on adolescents, as research shows that their brains are physiologically different than those of prior generations (McLeod and Lehmann).

Subsequently then, if education in America is to be reformed, it will be necessary for educators at all levels to lead effectively, especially in regard to technology. As a current classroom teacher whose role is likely to evolve into one as an Instructional Technology Coach (ITC), it is important to clearly define my philosophy of leadership so that I may effectively contribute to the change reformists wish to see. I believe my philosophy is best represented by Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian educator and philosopher, who once said, “We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us” (Naughton). It is through a detailed exploration of this quote that my philosophy will be more clearly defined. It is also worth noting that while the term *tools* is often associated with specific hardware and software technologies, my use of the term will extend beyond that. Where as the first half of McLuhan’s quote emphasizes the shaping of *tools*, the term should first be considered to be interchangeable with *teachers*.

In order to effectively lead teachers, several approaches need to be taken. The first is to reduce the amount of tension associated with a particular topic, and for many, the topic will be technology. According to Jason Margolis, author of *How Teachers Lead Teachers,* humor is an effective strategy to reduce tensions associated with a particular topic. It also helps alleviate the tensions associated with the power dynamics of leading, and it helps facilitate a relaxed environment (Margolis). When leading teachers, I may take a similar approach to that of Don Hall, who admits to opening his keynote speeches with the statement, “I really dislike technology” (Hall). While Hall’s intent may not have been to garner laughter, the effect is similar, as it gives the leader special sensitivity to his audience (Hall). When not using humor to win over teachers, I will attempt to demonstrate the relevancy of technology across all content areas.

The second strategy of effective leadership shared by Margolis is to make sure all teachers feel included during technology presentations. Margolis adds that although some presentations may not be specifically designed for all content areas, finding a way to convince teachers that the ideas of the presentation can be applied to their content area is crucial (Margolis). In the opportunities I had thus far in leading teachers, I made a conscious effort to practice this. I can recall several instances where I introduced a new *tool* to our faculty, and initially only some of the staff appeared to be interested. However, once I demonstrated how the *tool* could be used not only in Language Arts, but Math, Science, Social Studies, and Foreign Languages, I won them over. Similarly, to build on the relevancy of the technology integration strategy previously described, it is also important to frame technology integration as easily adaptable.

Margolis encourages leaders to use language that suggests what they are about to learn is easy and adaptable. For example, phrases such as, "It takes no prep time" and "It actually helps us to go faster” increases teacher buy-in (Margolis). While these phrases may not always be applicable, I have found that presenting the outcomes of technology integration and working backwards is a similar and effective buy-in strategy. Specifically, when I have presented Moodle quizzes to teachers, I begin by showing them the *Grade Report*, which consists of an alphabetized list of their students and the automatically tallied scores. In general, teachers were impressed by the end result and were therefore more willing to learn how to take the steps to achieve it. I attribute the success of this strategy to one of the characteristics of adult learners, which is, “[Teachers] want to know the goals of what they are learning” (Livingston). In this particular instance, one of the goals was to save time for teachers, and so they were more eager to buy-in. Another strategy I will employ as an ITC is to model being an ideal learner.

The main quality of being an ideal learner is to acknowledge that importance of continual learning. In his research, Margolis found that “When teacher leaders explained how they themselves worked through using a new approach with their students … the teacher learners admitted their own struggles more openly and displayed more hunger for new approaches to address classroom dilemmas” (Margolis). Furthermore, being a continual learner with respect to technology is especially important, since the field is always emerging. By sharing the emergent technologies and research I am exposed to with my colleagues, a message is communicated that I have a genuine interest in the field and am dedicated to bettering our educational institution. Furthermore, one topic that requires continual learning in regard to educational technology integration is legal and ethical considerations.

As an ITC, legal and ethical considerations will come up often. While school districts write and adopt acceptable use policies, students, teachers, and faculty members will need guidance on how to properly honor them. Similarly, with an increase of educational technology integration, copyright, patents, trademarks, and other intellectual property are more likely to be threatened. Since each of these considerations can result in moral and ethical conflicts as well as legal ramifications, it is imperative that an ITC ensures that preventative measures are taken and that acceptable use policies are enforced.

The most effective way to honor legal and ethical considerations alike is to educate learners about what is and is not permitted in an educational setting. While the topic is serious, it can also be complex and dull. Therefore, I see no reason that an ITC cannot educate their adult learners about these issues through a learner-centered approach, while utilizing the qualities of the best professional development workshops.

For example, adult learners wish to know the goals of what they are learning, they want relevancy in what they are learning, and they want to learn cooperatively (Livingston). An ITC could prepare a simple professional development session where they ask small groups of teachers to examine ethical/legal case studies from their own profession, and report back to a whole group. From there, the ICT could set a goal for the staff to compile a list of ethical/legal issues they wish to take away from the case studies and will collectively honor as educators. While this exercise is not necessarily new or complex, it is representative of andragogical learning theories (Livingston).

In the latter half of McLuhan’s quote that drives my philosophy of leadership, he states, “our *tools* shape us”. Ultimately, the *tools* detailed in my philosophy are metaphors for our educators, and *us* is symbolic of adolescents, or the future of America. While the end result is evolving and yet to be determined, one thing is for certain: by having a sound philosophy as an ICT and modeling the leadership skill-set learned in this course, our system will be primed to rethink the traditional roles of teachers and students, and finally be of service to our students who think, function, and learn differently than they ever have before.

Works Cited

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